

## **FirstNet's Swenson to Congress: Final RFP due this year, 'we should be shot' if 2022 goal not met**

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[FirstNet](#) plans to issue its final request for proposal (RFP) by the end of this year, and “we should be shot” if the much-anticipated nationwide broadband network for first responders is not operational by 2022, FirstNet Chairwoman Sue Swenson testified today during a hearing before the Senate Commerce Committee.

FirstNet officials have said for months that they plan to issue a draft RFP by the end of March. Although plans to have the final RFP released by the end of 2015 have been mentioned, FirstNet Acting Executive Director TJ Kennedy on Monday declined to comment when asked about that timeline. But Swenson answered a question from Committee Chairman John Thune (R-S.D.) by stating that the final RFP would be issued “toward the latter part of the calendar year.”

“We are on track to issue that [final RFP], and we are on track with all of the milestones we communicated over a year ago,” Swenson said during the oversight hearing, which was [webcast](#).

After the statement, Thune asked if any factors could delay the release of the final RFP, but Swenson did not identify any.

“I’m not aware of any that could delay that,” Swenson said. “Internally, we believe that’s the case. Depending on the comments we get back from the vendor community and others about that draft RFP, it may extend it a little bit. But I think [any delay] will be well worth the time, so—when we actually issue the RFP—it will be done right, and it’s done effectively.

When Sen. Deb Fischer (R-Neb.) sought more information about FirstNet’s operational timeline, Swenson described the process that FirstNet is pursuing but did not mention any dates, noting the possibility that FirstNet could experience some “bumps along the way” to deploying the network.

“The goal is to get that RFP out, get the responses in, put that information together and deliver plans to the governors of every state,” Swenson said. “What happens during that timeframe, we’re hoping, is smooth. I hope you get a sense of the sense of urgency that we feel about this and how hard we’re working to get that done as quickly as possible.”

Fischer asked, “Do you think you’ll reach that 2022 goal that’s out there?”

“Oh, yeah,” Swenson said. “If we don’t, we should be shot.”

After listening to laughter in the room, Fischer said, “Mr. Chairman, I don’t even know how to respond ... I appreciate your honesty on that.”

During the hearing, Bruce Andrews—deputy secretary for the U.S. Department of Commerce—said he expects the second round of State and Local Implementation Grant Program (SLIGP) funding to be released “in the next couple of months.”

Congress allocated \$7 billion to FirstNet, but published estimates regarding the potential cost of a nationwide broadband network have ranged from \$12 billion to \$47 billion. FirstNet officials are comfortable with internal cost estimates to deploy the network, but there is some uncertainty about how much revenue FirstNet can generate from the leasing of excess spectrum capacity, Swenson said. FirstNet hopes to have those questions answered through its RFP process.

But Swenson said FirstNet is “not looking for money” and believes the public-safety broadband system can be built with existing resources.

“Yes, we can [build the network], assuming that the assumptions we have in our plan are realized, which is why the RFP process is so important,” Swenson said. “We believe it can happen, but it will only be validated through the RFP process.”

“If we don’t realize what we believe the value of the spectrum is, we literally could fold up our tents and go home, which is not a good outcome ... If we don’t realize the value of that spectrum, it’s going to be very challenging to be self-sustaining.”

Swenson acknowledged that working within federal-government rules has been a challenging at times, particularly the hiring process. After three years, FirstNet has 110 full-time staffers, largely because the hiring process takes “nine to 10 months” to complete all levels of approvals, she said.

After hearing this, Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) asked whether [FirstNet](#) could be given direct hiring authority. Andrews said the request has been made twice, with the second request being made in August 2014. Swenson said the first request received a negative response, and the second request has not received a response to date.

Blumenthal said this situation needs to change.

“The success of this very, very important national priority depends on having the best and the brightest,” Blumenthal said. “There is simply no way you can compete for the limited pool of highly skilled, talented people who are being hired by Google, Apple ... There is huge demand for these people, and you’re telling them, ‘Sorry, we can’t let you know for another 10 months,’ and they’re going to say, ‘Thanks, but no thanks,’ right?”

Swenson said, “In fact, they have,” later agreeing with Blumenthal’s speculation that the scenario has occurred “in large numbers.”

Blumenthal continued, “The federal government is failing you. I think we have an obligation to compel the relevant agencies ... to do better, to do more and to do it more quickly, so that you can succeed in this task.”

Other key points addressed during the hearing included:

- Swenson's repeated commitment to deploy the FirstNet system in rural areas, noting that this is a focus of the public notice approved by board members on Monday;
- Swenson and Andrews noting that cybersecurity is a "priority" for FirstNet;
- Swenson saying that utilizing existing government-owned communications is proving to be "more difficult than we anticipated," citing experiences in Los Angeles; and
- Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) stating that officials in the state of Mississippi are "disappointed and upset" that the state's public-safety [LTE](#) plans were halted by the [National Telecommunications and Information Administration](#) (NTIA) as the system was just "weeks away" from being deployed when Congress created FirstNet in 2012. Andrews said the Mississippi program did not meet the statutory guidelines, in part because it did not provide broadband coverage.

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